

To the rescue

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The second Battle of Cedar Creek has ended in victory, thanks to the Vermonters.

It was a battle to preserve a monument in Virginia, honoring the contribution by Vermont soldiers in the first Battle of Cedar Creek, which took place in October 1864.

Victory in the battle to save the monument is owed to Sen. James Jeffords, a leader in Congress in the preservation of important Civil War battlefields. He secured \$2 million in federal funds allowing the National Park Service to buy land around the monument, which is in private hands.

Jeffords has been effective in fighting this battle in part because he has had the guidance of Howard Coffin, a former Jeffords staff member, who is the author of several books describing Vermonters' role in the Civil War.

It is well known that Vermont sent more soldiers per capita to the Civil War than any other state. And they gained a reputation as able fighters in numerous important battles, including Gettysburg and the Wilderness. One can still visit a quiet meadow at Spotsylvania in Virginia where Vermont soldiers took enormous losses at what became known as the Bloody Angle.

The Battle of Cedar Creek was another important battle, fought in the waning days of the war in the Shenandoah Valley where Northern troops were at work destroying food supplies needed by the Confederates. On the morning of Oct. 19 Confederate troops under General Jubal Early attacked Northern troops camped along Cedar Creek. Soon the Union Army was overrun, except for Vermont soldiers who engaged the Confederates in vicious fighting, until they too were pushed back. The Vermonters suffered casualties estimated to be as high as 70 percent, but their action allowed the remaining elements of the Union Army to prepare for the Confederate onslaught.

The Union Army in the Shenandoah was under the command of General Philip Sheridan, who was away from the fighting during that bloody morning. When he heard the sound of the artillery, he mounted his famous black horse, Rienzi, and rode southward to rally his troops. It was a famous moment in Civil War history. The Union counterattack resulted in a major defeat for Early's forces and helped ensure the re-election of Abraham Lincoln a few weeks later.

The battlefields of the Civil War, many of them in Virginia, face continuing threats from encroaching development. Jeffords and Coffin together have rallied the forces of preservation, like Sheridan and Rienzi, or maybe like the Old Vermont Brigade at Cedar Creek.

There is nothing like standing on the battlefields at Gettysburg or Antietam to appreciate the vast scale and the epic importance of those chapters in our history. There are smaller, quieter battlefields, such as Spotsylvania, and lesser known battlefields, such as Cedar Creek, that contribute to the story, as well.

The Battle of Cedar Creek has been remembered in the huge painting by Julian Scott that occupies an entire wall of the Cedar Creek Room at the Statehouse in Montpelier. Thanks to Jeffords and Coffin, the Battle of Cedar

Creek is one chapter that will continue to be remembered, not just in Vermont, but at Cedar Creek as well.